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Always in Thresholds

Jonathan Wyatt

This essay resists the binaries that the threshold often seems to imply and works towards a notion of thresholds as multiplicitous and always present. The author provides an account of the anxiety-filled process of writing this essay and the here-and-now thresholds involved; and through this he argues for scholarship that embraces the discomfort—the terror—of the threshold.

Keywords: Thresholds; writing; travel; re-location; multiplicity

It's late December, 2013. I have been about to write this essay since September. The text has to be finished for the first Monday in January, 2014, twelve days from now. I am still about to write this essay.

I had a plan back in September. I was going to read and think until late November, a month ago. At that point, with the semester almost done, I would begin writing. I would get the essay written by Christmas. In this plan, I knew how the essay would unfold:

Process: I would write as I travelled. On the penultimate day of November, I would be catching a train from Edinburgh—our new home since August—to friends in Manchester, from there onto family in the south of England, and then back north to Scotland. Over five days, I would have plentiful writing time, and train travel would furnish me with threshold metaphors aplenty. Think of all those bridges! All

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that waiting, all that indeterminacy, all those between and across-es and overs!

Shape and content: The piece would chronicle our fresh-out-of-the-oven transition, after twenty-five years, from Oxford to Scotland; and my mid- to late-career move into a first academic position, teaching and supervising postgraduate students in counseling and psychotherapy research. The essay's structure would play with time, taking the reader back and forth, here and there, as I wrote into this geographical, professional, personal, mid-life shift—and yet more juicy threshold metaphors.

The essay was going to rock.

The writing process, shape, and structure all unfolded more or less as I imagined: The finished piece takes the reader with me on my train journeys and into the experience of the Big Move North, and via personal narrative it examines the challenge of posthumanist theory to personal narrative. Very wry.

But . . .

I should have left the essay as the fantasy it was, where it had been so fluent, incisive, and theoretically rich. In the flesh, the text is directionless, flabby, and smug, and no amount of cutting and re-working has improved it.

I am only days from the deadline that I have agreed with the journal editor, Stacy Holman Jones. I can't send that essay to Stacy. It sucks.

I am a slow writer, one who needs time to work on drafts, well ahead of or preferably without a deadline. At 10 pm on Christmas Day, I am starting again, fearful and urgent. No longer confident and omnipotent, I have no idea what to write or if I have anything to say.

. . .

I am shaken. I am appalled at the prospect of the “Hi-Stacy-I’m-sorry-I-have-nothing-to-send-you” email, which I fear may yet have to be written. As the shadow of that email creeps ever closer, I have to risk writing into the unknown. During my first semester’s teaching in Edinburgh, I have been advising doctoral students: “Write. Just write. Don’t think about what you’re going to write. Just write.” With glib confidence, I have presented this counsel as if “just” writing were an easy task that I do every day. It isn’t, and I don’t. “Writing: touching the mystery, delicately, with the tips of the words, trying not to crush it, in order to un-lie” (Cixous 134). The first part of Cixous’s sentence suggests that

writing is a subtle but appealing task, the wrapping and unwrapping of a fragile gift. That final phrase –“in order to un-lie”—indicates what is at stake. Our predisposition is to mask the truth from ourselves but, if we dare, our words may strip us naked, revealing not (only) our beauty but our raw, unwelcome ugliness. Writing, ruthless, may drag us to places we don’t know (and surely don’t plan for), to the edges of the void (3). Cixous writes:

I don’t plan ever. The only thing I plan is not planning, but I don’t even plan that. I just have a feeling which is a very strange feeling of trust. It’s as if I believe that if I go to the place of appointment, it will come. That’s all . . . and that what will happen will come from the worst. That’s all I know. It will come from the worst. (Cixous, in Sellers 122)

Here I am at the place of appointment, later than I’d like and having taken a circuitous route. I’m not sure that I trust, and I don’t relish getting in touch with the worst. But, hey ho, maybe it’ll be worth it for the ride. All I can do, with Cixous, is to “endeavour to write the truth of the present moment” (Cixous xi), even if my truth is but fluff.

. . .

I don’t know what to make of thresholds. This—here, now—may be one; these moments, these hours, these days, poised between nothing and something.

I am approaching another, the threshold of this essay’s deadline. Beyond it, and with no writing, I shall be too late. Beyond it, I shall be someone-who-sometimes-can’t-write, someone-who-sometimes-lets-people-down.

I may be within another, one where I am lost; the child tentatively reaching into the dark, not knowing.

Or I am beyond a threshold, through it, the other side, because at least I am writing.

There is not just a single threshold but multiple thresholds, all simultaneously in play, baubles I am lunging to catch as they tumble from the falling Christmas tree.

. . .

You reached the threshold of our house in Abingdon, Oxfordshire, England—the one we left in August after half a middle-aged

lifetime—through an arched, double outer door and into a porch, where we'd stack muddied boots and shoes. I'd hold open the main door for welcome visitors. They'd step from the porch across the narrow strip of original wood, and I'd close the door, all of us oblivious to the low hurdle they'd cleared.

I have never given thought to that two-foot strip, though I might have applied wood stain to it once when it became faded and worn. At the porch, I'd greet and fuss our friends in from the cold and our attention would turn to the hall, where we would exchange hugs and kisses, thence to the living room, where the real action would take place. The threshold was one of a number of points of entry. It was just a beginning to the show that followed. Not even that: an invisible start to the beginning of the show that followed; and an unnoticed end of the end as we bade farewell. No one ever paused, holding a stockinged foot hovering and hesitant. The threshold was the puny kid who gets ignored, of less significance than the doormat in the porch that at least was trodden upon.

No, I don't know what to make of thresholds.

Thresholds always seem to be between one thing and another, between outside and inside, a line to be crossed, a point beyond which something—pain, patience, learning, life—changes.¹

You reach a threshold. You stand at one. Hesitate at it. Beyond, below, or above it lies a something, a Big Something, a Painful Something, a Pleasurable Something. We don't talk of approaching the threshold of, say, taking out the bins or saying goodnight to our children.

No, I'm not sure about thresholds. I'm not even sure I like them.

• • •

Perhaps it's how thresholds evoke indecision and hesitation. Or their suggestion of not knowing. Of nothing being settled. Of being neither one thing nor the other, neither here nor there. Thresholds are just so liminal.

Perhaps, on the contrary, I am wary of them because the term suggests only linearity and binaries. Thresholds lie between one thing and another. Between tolerable and intolerable pain. Between sustainable and unsustainable population size. Between childhood and adulthood. At a threshold, we turn our heads one way or another, backwards or forwards, with only those directions available.

What if thresholds were not places or points we passed through or moved beyond *en route* elsewhere but those we seek for their own sake, places we might wish to tarry or even make our home? Not the threshold *to* a new world, but the threshold *as* the new world. What if I had greeted visitors to our house and settled our chairs awkwardly straddling the narrow doorway? Unlikely in practice (where would the beers rest?), but the principle remains. It is only a matter of perception in any case; we are all always in between, always at or in a threshold, even when we think we have “arrived.” Even when we are here, we are on the way there; on the way is already there.

The Abingdon porch was the threshold to the threshold, the threshold to the hall, the hall to the living room; the house a twenty-five-year threshold to Edinburgh.

• • •

But I am romanticizing (a risk when under pressure, when the desire for neat roundings-off and blithe assertions is intense). Thresholds may be stark, uncompromising, brutal.

A train travel poem:

Two thresholds

1

She maneuvered him backwards off the train,
Negotiating the steep drop from carriage to platform,

He deftly twisting his chair as the front wheels
Touched the ridged concrete edge,

She, in cobalt tracksuit and white trainers,
Stepped back onto the train to retrieve her bicycle.
A deft, choreographed sequence
Indicating familiarity and confidence.

For the final, polished move
She brought the bicycle's front wheel towards the open door—
But it slid closed
He outside, she within.

He yelled, stabbing the square, now-unlit, button
set into lime green steel outside,
She, inside, frantic, striking the glass with flat hands.

The train, ignorant, blind, careless, inexorable,
 Drew away from the man in his chair on the emptying platform
 And passed me as I walked on to buy coffee,
 Catch my next train and begin to write.

2

I observed this scene.
 I had alighted from the next-door carriage.
 I could have done something.

When their door closed, I was already beyond them,
 heading towards my exit, towards the front of the train,
 towards the driver, towards those who could have acted.

Looking back and realizing what was about to take place,
 I increased the speed of my walk.
 I raised a hand, the one not holding my heavy carpet bag.
 No one saw me, or no one took any notice.

As the train began to leave, I turned and saw him.
 He was still.
 I could not read his stillness.

I could have gone back, but did not.

Neither threshold, neither the metal and rubber edge of the sliding train carriage door nor those moments of opportunity for taking action, was a desirable place to be. Neither place was a “new world” to be welcomed. In the former, there was no liminal space/time, just a harsh limen; and the other was pregnant with courses of action other than the ones I chose.

. . .

New Year has come and gone. It is the first evening of 2014. Evicted from my living room by our twenty-something daughter and friend watching brash television, I write on my bed aware I now have only five days to complete this piece. Five days to find what it is I have to say; and what it is I am avoiding.

I have returned to Edinburgh after a long Christmas in the south of England. There, our life in Edinburgh felt chimeric; equally, I found those southern English places perplexing, the flattened vowels taking me by surprise. After the long drive north again yesterday, New Year’s

Eve, we walked amongst the revelers in the city center before returning to our flat at midnight to watch the castle breathing fireworks into the dim night.

The strangers who'd hailed us on our walk appeared in my dreams, where I urgently demanded what thresholds conjured for them.

• • •

A shared cup of tea in a threshold:

Early May. The call came on the Wednesday after the Monday. I was in my box of an office at home in Abingdon, beginning my day's work. When the phone rang, I knew it would be about the Edinburgh job. After we'd exchanged pleasantries, he spoke deliberately: "I'm calling you with the outcome of Monday's interview." I tried to take a deep breath but couldn't. A pause. "Jonathan, I am phoning to offer you the position."

Fifteen minutes later, I pressed the red icon on my handset to bring the call to an end, collapsed to the ground and cried, roaring into the worn carpet.

I texted my partner, Tess. I called her and left a voicemail message, only hinting at the news. She had to be there in the flesh, or it would not be true.

We met at lunchtime. We sat in our regular Abingdon café in near silence, looking at the table, our hands clasped around teacups. We spoke only in half-sentences, working our way towards a decision, lining up the implications of disrupting ours and others' settled lives. I veered between excitement and fear, hope and loss.

• • •

There was only ever going to be one decision. Our reaction was more one of disbelief than of not knowing; shock at being on the cusp of between-worlds.

I don't know what to make of thresholds. Thresholds may be places we seek despite the cost, despite the risk.

• • •

Lisa Mazzei and Alecia Jackson conceptualize their collaborative writing process as taking place "in the threshold," an "in-between space, a space of shared deterritorialization in which we constitute one another" (450). Co-authors and co-editors of two books and numerous

papers, the “threshold” for Mazzei and Jackson takes the virtual-material form of online documents into which they each contribute at different times and at distance. More than this, though, they propose the threshold as that figurative in-between space where they think and write:

Such thinking and writing refuses a distancing or separation of the two in the same way that our writing in the threshold refuses a contribution by our individual author selves in a writing between-the-two. While extremely productive in terms of thought not possible by our singular “selves,” such thinking and writing is at times not merely exhausting in the sense of fatiguing, but exhausting in that we are constantly pulled back into the threshold, into the data, into this between-the-two, into new thinking that refuses to lose its hold on us. (451)

The threshold is a place of excess where distinctions between “selves” become blurred and vanish, where the notion of “selves” even ceases to have significance. It is not they, Lisa and Alecia, who are thinking and writing; rather, the threshold is where thinking and writing takes place, where thinking and writing are something that happens (Colebrook).

One author leaves words—“pieces of language that fall from us”—for the other and the other takes them on (Mazzei and Jackson 452). She may be excited by what she finds, or frustrated, stuck, baffled, more. They and their bodies, they and their affects, are produced in and by the threshold:

So in the threshold, the text, with its magnetic force, draws us in and produces affect . . . [O]ur passing through the threshold is mutually constituting in that as we make matter, matter makes us. (453)

Mazzei and Jackson explain that they are puzzled when people ask them how they work together or how they generate ideas for their work. *It* happens, *they* happen, in the threshold, in and amongst the “assemblage” (Deleuze and Guattari) of the two authors’ histories, their work together, their interests and their materialities.

For them, the threshold is not a tip into something else; or at least, it is—they talk about a “passing-through”—but not only so. It is a space they return to, a space they cherish. In the threshold distinctions blur; “knowing” is not possible; “selves” are lost. The threshold is loose, fluid, uncertain, a “site of diffraction—an opening that spreads our thoughts and questions in unpredictable patterns of waves and intensities” (455),

a space and time for play (Turner). Writing in traditional, linear prose form about collaborating in the messy, tangled threshold can only offer the reader a glimpse, a hint, about a process that the authors do not claim to know themselves.

Mazzei and Jackson's threshold offers risk and uncertainty. As I write, late on an early January night, later into the night than I would choose to, I am drawn to their threshold even as I struggle to grasp it. Yet there remains the notion that it is between one thing and another: "A threshold has no function, purpose, or meaning until it is connected to other spaces" (450). It is still the passageway between one place and another, the ceiling to be broken through, the floor to crash.

. . .

I don't know what to make of thresholds, and I'm not sure whether I like them, but my intuition, my gut, tells me it's where our research needs to be. I want to push thresholds further than Mazzei and Jackson do, towards a place—a multiplicity of spaces and times—where categories (this and that, here and there) become indistinct, where we position ourselves and our inquiries as always in thresholds, forever liminal, forever refusing "here" or "there," seeking out the pauses, not the notes, in the song; the pauses *as* notes.

In such thresholds our research can be at its most critical, where we take nothing for granted, where everything is at stake. It means conducting inquiries as if we do not know where they will take us. As if there were no more time.

. . .

There is no more time. I must finish and send this, whatever it is, to Stacy.

The wind whines as yet another winter storm passes, the rain whipping the sash windows. Elsewhere, to the south and west, this tempest is causing damage.

I sigh. I sigh because I feel as if I have failed, or as if writing has failed me: I have not been able to notice what it is that I am avoiding. Maybe there's nothing and this is all there is.

Or perhaps in thresholds, in thresholds' utter in(de)finity, we can only fail; and it may be the inevitability—the necessity—of failure that I have been refusing to see.

Note

- ¹ See, amongst countless examples: Turner, Sibbett, Kiley and Wisker, Sykes.

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